

Preparing Company Officers for Their New Role

Executive Development

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Abstract

Many fire departments throughout the United States have not provided their company officers with the knowledge and skills to perform one of the most important roles in the fire service. Several departments promote individuals to company officer and then expect them to find the training necessary to be effective. This backwards procedure often produces officers who are not prepared to lead the most expensive and valuable resource the fire service has, our firefighters. The Arlington, Texas Fire Department, like many other departments, did not provide formal training to develop its personnel to perform the duties and responsibilities of company officer. The purpose of this research was to identify the methodology to create an officer development program that would provide perspective and existing officers the skills and abilities to confidently perform the duties of company officer. The research methods used in this paper include the evaluative and historical methodology. This methodology was used to answer three research questions.

1. Do acting and permanent company officers feel that they are adequately prepared to perform the skills as a company officer in the Arlington Fire Department?
2. What programs currently exist in other fire departments to prepare personnel to perform as company officers?
3. Do college level courses and degrees have a place in an officer development program?

To answer these questions, a historic review of pertinent literature from the Learning Resource Center of the National Fire Academy, the Arlington Fire Department library, and the author's personal library was conducted. Additionally, two surveys gathered information on the subject. One survey was conducted of current employees of the Arlington Fire Department. The second survey was distributed to five Texas fire departments.

The results of the literature review and the surveys indicated that many fire departments do not prepare their personnel to perform the role of company officer. It did, however, identify several departments that have developed successful officer programs.

After a review of both the sampling surveys and the literature, it was recommended that an officer development program should be established for all ranks within the Arlington Fire Department. Additionally, this program should meet or exceed the industry standard, N.F.P.A. 1021, Professional Standards for Company Officers.

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Introduction

Today's firefighters are well prepared for the challenges that they will face. Most cities require an elaborate training program before recruits are assigned to emergency duties. This is not always true for the company officer. Many are promoted to responsibilities that they have not been prepared to handle. The Arlington, Texas Fire Department, like many other departments, does not provide a formal training program to develop its personnel to perform the duties and responsibilities of company officer.

The purpose of this research is to identify the methodology to create an officer development program that would provide perspective and existing officers the skills and abilities to confidently perform the duties of company officer.

This paper will use historical and active research methodology. The research questions to be answered were:

1. Do acting and permanent company officers feel that they are adequately prepared to perform the skills as a company officer in the Arlington Fire Department?
2. What programs currently exist in other fire departments to prepare personnel to perform as company officers?
3. Do college level courses and degrees have a place in an officer development program?

Background and Significance

Since its formation in 1948, the Arlington, Texas Fire Department has not had a formal officer development program. During the early years the selection of company officer was based on seniority, popularity, and a gut feeling of whom could best perform the duties. As the

department grew, the selection of company officer was produced from a competitive exam. Candidates would study specified resource material and a written exam would determine the officer selection. This process did not always produce the best officer but only identified who had the best study skills. The resource material was general in nature and did not always prepare the company officer to meet the expectations of the Arlington Fire Department.

Over the years, several efforts have been made to develop a pre-promotional process to prepare company officers for their leadership role. In 1985 a program was developed by the training staff which consisted of a matrix of classes that could be taken at the local community college and Texas A and M University Extension Service. However, it was soon learned that attendance in these classes did not create the well-rounded officer that the department had desired.

In 1989 a major process was utilized to identify specific courses that would assist each rank in performing their responsibilities. A development team, consisting of a curriculum specialist and eight officers of varying ranks, was charged with this task. Through the use of surveys and focus groups, subjects were identified that would assist officers in performing their role as identified by their job description. However, this program was never fully implemented.

In 1991 another officer school was developed and taught by the department's chief officers. The course content was based on the National Fire Academy courses that addressed leadership, planning, time management, report writing, and conflict management. This curriculum was taught to a few select candidates before being discontinued.

Today, new and existing officers still develop their skills by observing other company officers and duplicating those actions that appear to be effective. Even though the department

supports requests for individual outside training, the lack of a well-defined preparatory officer program has created a cadre of officers with varying skill levels.

The basis of this project is derived from the requirements of the Executive Fire Officer Program's Executive Development course. The subject matter is sufficiently relevant to unit 4 (Problem Solving), and unit 9 (Organizational Change and Development).

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review was to identify how other fire departments had addressed officer development and to evaluate if higher education should be required for company officers. Several applied research papers from the Learning Resource Center of the National Fire Academy were reviewed for this project. Additionally, numerous magazine articles provided information to answer the research questions.

Throughout the world, the fire service company officer is called on to lead firefighters into some of the most hazardous conditions known to man. He must motivate his personnel to accomplish the department's goals both on and off the fire ground. In an article for Fire Engineering Magazine, Bruce Cavallari states that "while company officers have a wide range of responsibilities, seldom has he been provided with more than on the job training". (Cavallari, 1997, p.6) Thomas Aurnhammer identifies this philosophy as "an antiquated system of developing leadership skills within the fire service, give them the ball and see where they run with it," a painful process for all involved. He went on to say that, "the investment we make now in the growth of fire personnel will pay off handsomely when it comes time to select those who will lead us into the future." (Aurnhammer, 1994, p.50). Richard Lefebure writes, "The fire services has for too long labored under the old adage, "experience is the best teacher." (Lefebure, 1993, p. 75)

Phillip L. Queen states, “In a great number of fire departments around the country, the company officer is becoming the most important person in the department.” He goes on to say that, “The company officer carries out goals and objectives set forth by chief officers as well as maintains some kind of continuity within the ranks. Usually, the company officer will be the first person at an emergency to make decisions and set the groundwork for expansion into a much larger operation”. (Queen, 1993, p. 21)

Morton D. Shurtleff believes that the officer of the future must attain a sound education. He stated that “after all these years, we are still promoting first and training later”. He went on to say that a sound Company Officer Development Program is needed to prepare future officers. (Shurtleff, 1994, p. 22) In the same article, William Warren stated that the fire officer of the future would meet a basic and uniform standard of training (similar to NFPA Professional Qualifications Standards).

Many departments across the United States have implemented officer development programs. In a research paper for the Executive Fire Officer Program (EFOP), Michael Ganz references two such programs; the Los Angeles Fire Department’s Company Officers’ Management and Operations course and the Rocky Mountain Fire Academy’s Officer Development Program. The Los Angeles program consists of operational tactics and management. The operational tactics portion includes: truck and engine company operations, incident command, arson investigation, fire prevention, brush fire operations, dispatch procedures, hazardous materials operations, freeway operations, emergency medical operations, harbor operations, metro rail and airport operations, air support operations, high-rise operations, river rescue, tactical alerts, and a review of lessons learned. The management section included

communications, ethics, discipline, writing skills, problem-solving, leadership, employee relations, and counseling.

The Rocky Mountain Fire Academy's program core curriculum is based on the following goals:

1. To develop confidence and improve the leadership skills and abilities of the company officer and
2. To improve the transition from acting officer to company officer upon promotion.

The topics covered in this program include; incident management/tactics, fireground preparation/decision making, multi-story incidents, incident safety, simulator/drill ground, leadership, interpersonal styles, legal issues, problem solving, performance evaluations, and ethics.(Ganz, 1997 pp. 11-12)

Assistant Chief James Kefalas describes how five departments in the Pacific Northwest banded together to create an officer's academy. The departments included: Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue, Vancouver, Washington Fire Department, Portland Fire Bureau, Clackamas County Fire District #1, and the Oak Lodge Fire District. Their goal was to create a program that:

- Utilized instructors who were recognized as experts in their field
- Was not limited to only fire-related training
- Was able to be duplicated annually
- Created an atmosphere where students could interact and get to know each other.

The curriculum of this course included:

- Advanced Tactics & Strategy
- Leadership
- Diversity and Cultural Awareness

- Advanced Wildland Interface
- Fire Officer Law
- Dealing with Difficult People
- Team Building
- Coaching and Counseling
- Communication Skills
- Ethics
- Incident Safety Officer
- Time Management
- Drug and Alcohol Recognition
- Customer Service

To further ensure the programs quality and credibility, they were able to get the program qualified to issue Fire Officer I certification through the Oregon Bureau of Public Safety Standards and Training. (Kefalas, 1997, p.6)

In 1989, the Gwinnett County Bureau of Fire Services developed a program to train its officers. The program was divided into three levels that targeted lieutenant, captain, and battalion chief. The major courses included Administration I & II, Personnel Management, Incident Command and Public Education. The author stated that this program prepared the targeted positions well but failed to provide educational opportunities for candidates below the officer rank who desired to promote. (Post, 1991, p.5)

As more and more departments focus on the development of company officers, the issue of the need for higher education must be examined. In an article for Fire Chief Magazine, Burton Clark states that, “The benefits of college and graduate-school education are an innate

part of what makes a profession a profession. If the fire service takes its own professionalism seriously, it should do more to promote fire science as an academic discipline.” (Clark, 1993, p.50) Chief Luther Fincher states that fire officers of the future will be more educated than in the past, as more candidates have degrees before coming into the fire service or earn them after they are employed. This education will be essential to meet the ever-expanding responsibilities for prevention, response and mitigation of emergencies whose scope and seriousness will be beyond our wildest dreams. (Fincher, 1994, p.24)

Many times, veteran firefighters have stated that a college degree never put out a fire. However, in an article for The Voice Magazine, Ken Brown describes how progressive fire managers realize that learned principles, properly applied, can reduce the time, energy, cost, and person hours to do the job. He goes on to report that many colleges are working to help the fire service by providing higher education that meets the needs of firefighters through chief officers. Mr. Brown states that, “The theory was that a Fire Science Certificate, from Kirkwood College, should help a firefighter get on the “fast track” to becoming an officer.” (Brown, 1995, p. 28)

To be eligible for promotion in the Miramar Fire Rescue, Dennis Matty states that an associate degree is required for the ranks of lieutenant and above. In addition, the successful completion of Fire Officer One training, and five years experience are also required to be eligible for officer-level promotional exam. They have used this program for several years and all involved agree that they should continue. (Matty, 1998, pp. 14-18)

This literature review has identified several officer development programs being utilized by the fire service in the United States. These programs identified course content as well as the benefit of the program to each fire organization. Additionally, the benefit of higher education

was assessed. The information from this review will be beneficial to developing a company officer development program for the Arlington, Texas Fire Department.

Procedures

The research procedure used in preparing this paper consisted of a literature review that was conducted by utilizing several EFO papers from the Learning Resource Center of the National Fire Academy. Additional literature review was conducted at the Arlington, Texas Fire Department, as well as the author's personal library.

Two surveys were also used to gather information from both inside and outside the Arlington Fire Department. The internal survey (appendix A) was used to determine if members supported an officer development program. This survey was given to 120 uniformed Arlington employees. This group was comprised of fifteen captains, forty-five lieutenants and sixty apparatus operators. Of the 120 surveys, 46 (38%) were completed and returned. The survey contained a total of ten questions. Questions one through three identified the rank, years of service, and level of education of the respondent. Question four asked where Arlington company officers received their training. Question five inquired about the need for human relations training before being promoted. Question six asked the respondent if company officers were adequately prepared to perform the skills of their position. Questions seven and eight attempted to identify the level of education required to be a company officer. Question nine attempted to identify members who would be interested in assisting with the development of an officer program. The final question was an open-ended question seeking comments on how an officer development program should be implemented.

The external department survey (appendix B) was sent to select fire departments throughout Texas. A letter accompanied this survey explaining that the information would be included in the author's Executive Fire Officer research project. Five departments were mailed 20 surveys each, for a total of 100 surveys. It was asked that the surveys be distributed to company officers and apparatus operators. Since it was realized that not all departments use promoted individuals to drive the apparatus, firefighters were also included. The surveys were to be returned in a self-addressed, stamped envelope, which was included with the surveys. Four departments returned surveys. However, most departments returned less than 20. A total of 53 surveys were returned. The survey asked a total of nine questions. Not included in the nine questions were questions about the size of the respondent's department and the population served. The nine questions on the survey closely paralleled the questions asked of the Arlington firefighters. Questions one through three dealt with the respondent's length of fire service, rank, and level of education. Questions four through nine asked the respondent to identify:

- where company officers received training,
- if company officers needed additional training in leadership,
- are company officers adequately prepared by their department,
- if college should be required,
- what level of education is necessary for company officers,
- if the respondent felt that the company officers are better prepared to handle emergency duties or personnel/administrative duties.

Limitations and Assumption

It was assumed that all survey questionnaires could be completed and returned within the requested time period.

An assumption was made that all of the participants would respond to the surveys with honest and factual data.

Results

The results of this research project were achieved through the literature review and two survey processes. One survey was designed to assess the research questions by members of varying ranks within the Arlington Fire Department, and the second survey was designed to provide a perspective of how other fire departments address similar issues.

A total of 220 surveys were distributed, one hundred twenty (120) within the Arlington Fire Department, and one hundred (100) to five other Texas fire departments. Ninety-nine surveys were returned and utilized in the results. Forty-six were returned from Arlington fire personnel, and fifty-three from other departments.

Thirty-one (67%) apparatus operators, fourteen (30%) lieutenants, and one (2%) captain returned the internal (AFD) surveys. Of this group, thirty-three (72%) had worked for the Arlington Fire Department for eleven to fifteen years. Nine (19%) had been with the department for sixteen to twenty years, two (4%) for over twenty years, and two (4 %) for six to ten years.

The respondents were queried as to their highest level of education. Two (4%) possessed only a high school diploma. The largest group, twenty-three (50%), had a high school

diploma and some college. Twelve (26%) had an Associate Degree, and nine (19%) possessed a Bachelor's Degree. No respondent reported a Master's or Doctorate Degree.

Four survey packets were received from cities ranging in size from twenty-five members to one hundred members. A total of fifty-three (53) surveys were returned in this group. Of this group, twenty-two (42%) were company officers, nine (18%) apparatus operators, and twenty-one (40%) Firefighters. The Largest portion of this group, twenty-seven (51%) had been in the fire service from six to ten years. Eighteen (34%) had been in the fire service for eleven to fifteen years, and three (5%) for sixteen to twenty years. Only one respondent (2%) had less than two years fire experience and four (7%) had less than five years experience.

The evaluation of this group's level of education revealed eight (15%) Bachelor Degrees, sixteen (30%) Associate Degrees, and twenty-nine (55%) members with high school diploma and some college.

When asked if company officers need additional training in leadership and administration before promotion, forty (87%) of the Arlington members checked yes and six (13)% checked no. Similarly, forty-nine (92%) of personnel from outside of the Arlington Fire Department felt company officers should be trained while four (7%) said the training was not necessary.

When asked if their department properly prepared company officers to perform the skills of their position, two (4%) of the Arlington members felt that they did and forty-four (96%) indicated that they did not. Twenty-eight (53%) of personnel from outside of the Arlington Fire Department answered this question by saying their department prepared them and twenty-five (47%) stated that their department did not prepare them properly.

Thirty-four Arlington respondents suggested that some college should be required to be a company officer, and twelve did not. Respondents from other departments answered this question with thirty-five (66%) checking yes and eighteen (34%) checking no.

When asked what level of education should be required to be a company officer, four (8%) Arlington respondents supported a Bachelor, fifteen (32%) thought an Associate Degree should be required, and twenty-seven (58%) thought high school was adequate. Thirty-eight (72%) respondents from outside Arlington felt that a high school diploma was sufficient, fourteen (26%) supported an Associate Degree, and one (2%) supported a Bachelor Degree.

The literature review and the data from the surveys provide information to answer the following research questions.

1. Do acting and permanent company officers feel that they are adequately prepared to perform the skills as a company officer in the Arlington Fire Department? Ninety-six percent of the Arlington members surveyed felt that the department did not prepare company officers. Members from other fire departments agreed that their department lacked training for company officers, however, at a substantially less percentage (47%).
2. What programs currently exist in other fire departments to prepare personnel to perform as company officers? The literature review revealed that several organizations had implemented successful officer development programs. Los Angeles City Fire Department, the Rocky Mountain Fire Academy, and Gwinnett County Bureau of Fire Services are organizations with such programs.
3. Do college level courses and degrees have a place in an officer development program? The literature review supported higher education to promote

professionalism in the fire service. Many of the respondents to the surveys held varying levels of degrees, however, a majority of those surveyed did not feel that a degree should be mandated for company officers. A majority did feel that some college work should be required to be an officer.

Table 1

Arlington Fire Department Officer Development Survey

| | Yes | No | Total |
|---|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Do company officers need additional training/education in the area of leadership and personnel administration prior to promotion? | 40 87% | 6 13% | 46 100% |
| Are company officers properly prepared to perform the skills of their position? | 2 4% | 44 96% | 46 100% |
| Should some level of college be required for promotion to company officer? | 34 74% | 12 26% | 46 100% |

Table 2

Executive Fire Officer Program Survey for departments outside of Arlington, TX

| | Yes | No | Total |
|---|-------------|-----------|------------|
| Do company officers need additional training/education in the area of leadership and personnel administration prior to promotion? | 49 92.5% | 4 7.5% | 53 100% |
| Are company officers properly prepared to perform the skills of their position? | 28 53% | 25 47% | 53 100% |
| Should some level of college be required for promotion to company officer? | 35 66% | 18 34% | 53 100% |

Discussion

The results of this research underscore dramatically the need to adequately prepare company officers for their leadership role. There seems to be a general consensus that an officer

development program helps candidates become better prepared to handle the duties of the position.

The literature review identified several fire departments that are successfully using officer development programs to train their personnel. It also identified N.F.P.A. 1021, Professional Fire Officer Qualifications as an industry standard on which a development program could be based.

The company officer is charged with the responsibilities of leading a group of firefighters into dangerous situations on a regular basis. He/she is responsible for their safety and effectiveness. However, many organizations do not invest in training the most important member of the fire service team, the company officer.

Recommendations

Recommendations developed as a result of this research project are summarized in the following paragraphs.

1. The Arlington Fire Department should invest in training current and prospective company officers to meet the expectations of the organization. This program should be a multi-level program that can be used for all levels of officer candidates, from lieutenant through chief officer.
2. The company officer development program should be balanced with emergency mitigation training (such as incident command training, strategy and tactics, and firefighter safety), and human relations skills (to include planning, conflict resolution skills, interpersonal communications, and leadership skills).

3. College level courses should be incorporated in the development program.

Management and communication skills should be required for entry level company officers. Captains and above should be required to obtain a minimum of an Associate Degree.

4. The program should be implemented in progressive steps in order to solicit the support of interested personnel and to monitor problems.

The company officer supervises the most important and expensive resource in any department, people. To provide effective, efficient service to our customers, we must invest in the preparation of the company officer.

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Appendix A

Executive Fire Officer Program

Officer Development Survey

Size of Department

- ☐ 10-25 members
☐ 25-75 members
☐ 75-100 members
☐ 100-150 members
☐ 150-250 members
☐ Over 250 members

Population served

- ☐ Less than 25,000
☐ 25,000 – 75,000
☐ 75,000 – 150,000
☐ 150,000 – 300,000
☐ Over 300,000

1. How long have you been a member of the career fire service?

- ☐ 0-2 years ☐ 6-10 years ☐ 16-20 years
☐ 3-5 years ☐ 11-15 years ☐ Over 20 years

2. What is your current position in the fire department?

- ☐ Firefighter ☐ Apparatus Operator ☐ Company Officer ☐ Training Officer

3. What level of education do you currently possess?

- ☐ High School ☐ Associate Degree ☐ Masters Degree
☐ High School – some college ☐ Bachelors Degree ☐ Doctorate

4. What training/education is provided to new officers in your department?

- ☐ Officer's Candidate School ☐ City Classes (Mandatory) ☐ City Classes (Voluntary) ☐ No formal Training Provided ☐ Other, please Specify
-

5. Do you feel company officers need additional training/education in the area of leadership and personnel administration prior to promotion?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Undecided

6. Company officers are adequately prepared by my department to perform the necessary skills of a company officer.

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Undecided

7. Some level of college attendance should be required for promotion to company officer.

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Undecided

8. What level of education is necessary to be successful as a company officer?

☐ High School ☐ Associate Degree ☐ Bachelor's Degree

9. As a general rule, company officers are better prepared to handle day to day administrative and personnel functions than they are fire/EMS incidents?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Undecided

Your help in gathering this information is greatly appreciated.

Appendix B

Officer Development Survey

1. How long have you worked for the Arlington Fire Department?

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 0-3 years | <input type="checkbox"/> 6-10 years | <input type="checkbox"/> 16-20 years |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3-5 years | <input type="checkbox"/> 11-15 years | <input type="checkbox"/> Over 20 years |

2. What rank do you currently hold?

- | | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Apparatus Operator | <input type="checkbox"/> Lieutenant | <input type="checkbox"/> Captain |
|--|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|

3. What level of education do you currently possess?

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> High School | <input type="checkbox"/> Associate Degree | <input type="checkbox"/> Masters Degree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> High School – some college | <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelors Degree | <input type="checkbox"/> Doctorate |

4. Where do Arlington Fire Department company officers currently receive adequate training to perform the skills of their position?

- | | | | |
|---|---|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Classes sponsored by City of Arlington | Community College Fire Science Program | Arlington Fire Academy | Other, please Specify |
-

5. Do you feel that your company officers need additional training/education in the area of leadership and personnel administration prior to promotion?

- | | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> Undecided |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|

6. Do you feel that Arlington Fire Department company officers are properly prepared to perform the skills of their position?

- | | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> Undecided |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|

7. Some level of college attendance should be required for promotion to company officer.

☐

Yes

☐

No

☐

Undecided

8. What level of education should be required for entry level company officers?

☐

High School

☐

Associate Degree

☐

Bachelors Degree

☐

Other

9. Would you be willing to participate in planning, developing, and implementing a comprehensive officer development program?

☐

Yes

☐

No

10. Please list any comments that you feel would assist the department in implementing an officer development program.

**Thank you for your participation in completing this survey.
The information gathered will be utilized in a research
paper for the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire
Officer Program.**